

R 131027Z FEB 09
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UNCLAS CONAKRY 000103

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CATERPILLAR INFESTATION HIGHLIGHTS WEAK AGRICULTURAL
SECTOR

11. This is an action request. Please see paragraph 10.

12. SUMMARY. The rare plague of caterpillars that devastated farm land in north and central Liberia has spread into the southern Forest Region of Guinea destroying crops, polluting water sources, and forcing farmers and families to remain in their villages and away from their fields. However, the infestation is unlikely to cause a widespread food emergency in Guinea. Pest control measures, including insecticide applications, have been initiated in Guinea, but no specific information on the efficacy of the spraying has been reported so far. Continued monitoring is critical both to ensure access to clean water supplies and that the infestation does not continue into the rainy season endangering vulnerable new crops. The infestation highlights the weakness of the agricultural sector in Guinea and the vulnerability of subsistence farmers. The GoG likely lacks the resources to respond adequately to meet the immediate needs of the affected population. END SUMMARY.

ECOLOGY AND CONTROL

13. Originally thought to be highly destructive army worms, the insects have now been positively identified as the caterpillars of the moth *Achaea catocaloides*. Relatively little is known about their ecology, life-cycle, or food sources in tropical ecosystems, although they are familiar to farmers and are one of the most common moths in the region. Endemic to West Africa and occurring through Uganda to East Africa, *A. catocaloides* rarely appear in such devastating numbers. The last infestation of such magnitude occurred 30 years ago in Liberia.

In high densities, the insects are defoliators and can strip vast swaths as they reproduce and devour food sources. *A. catocaloides* spin their cocoons on the ground making them susceptible to eradication through ground spraying and fires. In the current rare infestation, tens of millions have been reported on the ground in Guinea, dropping from trees, and falling into streams and rivers. Villagers use smokey fires to keep the insects away from their homes at night.

GUINEA INFILTRATION

14. The caterpillars have spread 25 kilometers into the lower Forest Region of Guinea. The Minister of Agriculture, Abdourahmane Sano, accompanied by a team of plant protection experts travelled to the Forest Region on January 31 to February 4 and met with villagers in Yowa, Yowi, Bafala, Gangamou, Tonote and Benie in Yomou Prefecture, located along the Liberian border. At this time, approximately 500 hectares with coffee, cacao and bananas plantations and 4500 forested hectares are infested. The Ministry of Agriculture estimates that between 3,000 and 5,000 individuals are currently affected.

15. Describing the situation, the mayor of Yomou, Mr. Bfamou Doualamou, said: "There is general panic in the area. Farmers are helpless and in serious need of drinkable water and assistance."

When asked what effect the spraying had, he said that there is not enough manpower, insecticide or equipment to deal with the invasion. The local Director of Agriculture stated that most villagers were subsisting for now on cassava, a crop that is stored in the ground. When asked about the scope of the infestation, he said there were "billions" of caterpillars.

CONTAMINATED WATER SOURCES

¶16. The caterpillars have severely polluted water sources with their excrement. Mr Doualamou described the extent of the contamination, saying: "Rivers in the area are affected to the point that fish are dying in large numbers." Only one of the affected villages, Yowa, has a protected well. When asked how the other villages were coping with no water, he said, "as best they can." A USAID fact finding trip to Yomou on February 2 revealed that some villages have lacked water for 2-3 months depending on the level of infestation, and that some villagers are now suffering from diarrhea and respiratory conditions. It is possible that the rainy season will flush and renew water sources, but in the meantime, the population remains at risk for water-borne diseases. Until the dry season ends in May, water quality will continue to be a major concern and should be monitored, although the Guinean Government likely lacks the capacity to do so.

REGIONAL FOOD EMERGENCY UNLIKELY

¶17. While the caterpillars have destroyed some crops, forests, and surrounding vegetation, a widespread food emergency seems unlikely. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported that most of the essential food crops (manioc/cassava, rice, maize and millet) are not yet in the ground as it is the dry season. However, farmers may be late in ground preparation and other pest control activities may delay planting in time for the wet season. Continued monitoring of the situation is essential to reduce the risk of food insecurity, especially because experts warn of a potential continued infestation as the caterpillars reproduce into the rainy season and the possibility that farmers may consume next year's seed stock.

CONTROL EFFORTS UNDERWAY

¶18. In Guinea, a pest control team recently began spraying in affected areas in the Forest Region. The GoG supplied an inadequate quantity of pesticide (600 liters) to Yomou Prefecture. Poorly controlled insecticide application is another area of concern as health and safety standards and guidelines may be compromised. USAID LES noted the absence of aid organizations in the area and that the FAO had no visible field interventions underway. A meeting in Monrovia between Guinean and Liberian officials is planned this month to discuss the situation and harmonize control methods.

COMMENT

¶19. The current *A. catocaloides* infestation appears to be a rare occurrence which has heightened the vulnerability of thousands of subsistence farmers and villagers, and highlighted the weakness of the agricultural sector in Guinea. The Ministry of Agriculture's National Director of Plant Protection Services told POL LES that his office lacks "modern pulverizers, insecticides, and resources to overcome this disaster." The absence of agricultural extensionists, active pest control programs, coordination with agricultural chemical producers, combined with the lack of agricultural credit, leave subsistence farmers with no means of combating the infestation other than burning. Although monitoring is recommended, it is unlikely that the GoG will be able to do so, which may ultimately amplify the negative effects of the infestation.

¶10. Post would appreciate AF/W confirming that a disaster declaration (if warranted) would be regarded as appropriate humanitarian assistance notwithstanding the current suspension.

